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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a data collection system to record children's progress and to encourage parents of young handicapped children. The system consists of a calendar with blank spaces in which parents place stickers listing developmental behaviors and record comments about their child. The approach has four main objectives: to supplement developmental information gathered with available tools, to increase parent participation in documenting child progress, to provide an unobtrusive method of documenting development, and to provide attainable goals and useful observations for children with severe handicaps. Data from testing the assessment system with 11 sets of parents and their preschool children show that the calendar with stickers provided a motivating system for the parents and encouraged them to record other information as well. Comments for parents are appended. (SW)

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Developmental Calendars: Early Intervention Parents Join in Charting Child Progress

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DEVELOPMENTAL CALENDARS: EARLY INTERVENTION PARENTS JOIN IN CHARTING CHILD PROGRESS

Introduction

Educators in early intervention programs for developmentally delayed children have struggled with questions about how to best keep data on children's progress. Particularly with severely delayed children, conventional assessment tools often do not yield changes in scores that accurately document the children's progress. At the same time, parents of handicapped children often feel discouraged about their children's limited progress. The data collection system described here arose from desires to devise a useful way to record children's progress and to encourage parents of handicapped children.

Brief Description of the Assessment System

The data collection system consists of a calendar with blank spaces in which parents place stickers listing developmental behaviors and record comments about their child. This calendar is patterned after baby calendars designed to record development during a child's first year of life, but unlike those baby calendars, includes stickers that represent very small increments of development, making them more appropriate for delayed children. The stickers fall into four developmental areas: gross motor, fine motor, language (including receptive language and expressive language), and cognitive development. The calendar's design calls for parents to place the stickers on the calendar on the dates their children accomplish the skills, and for parents and teachers to discuss the children's progress and goals in the context of an early intervention program.

Objectives of Calendar Assessment

This approach to assessment has four main purposes:

Objective 1: To supplement developmental information gathered with available assessment tools.

Traditional approaches to developmental assessment tend to emphasize measuring a child's progress by observing responses to

structured activities, either during early intervention program times at home or at a center or during formal assessments. Parents often report progress that they see in their child during more familiar activities or in more familiar surroundings but that the child does not display during formal assessments. This implies a need for a method of including information beyond that provided by formal assessments when documenting child progress, preferably a method that includes parent observations as an integral component.

Furthermore, formal assessments and resulting individual education plans usually provide developmental information and goals at spaced intervals. The system described here provides ongoing documentation of a child's progress toward goals and objectives and can simplify the process of keeping records needed to monitor progress and modify program goals. In addition, the very small increments between developmental items on the stickers allow for documentation of progress that may not show on instruments with larger developmental steps between test items.

Objective 2: To increase parent participation in documenting child progress and developing program goals while providing a mechanism for greater communication between parents and program staff.

While recognizing the importance of parent participation in setting program goals and providing developmental information, educators have lacked tools for actively and concretely structuring opportunities for parents to contribute to their child's goals. Parents, on the other hand, often do not know just what information about their child would best apply to the processes of setting goals and objectives and of documenting developmental progress. By providing a tool that is easy and motivating for parents to use, the calendar assessment system encourages parent participation in observing and recording child progress. The parents' records then provide material for discussion between parents and staff. By helping parents observe and describe developmental skills, the system helps equip parents to participate in formulating appropriate developmental goals for their children.

Objective 3: To provide an unobtrusive method of documenting development.

If they are to effectively provide developmental information that they observe at home, parents need a tool to help them document their observations. Such a tool must be rewarding for a parent to use and must be easy enough to use that it will not

impose on a parent's already strained schedule. The calendar system speaks to these needs by emphasizing observations that parents can make during normal, everyday activities. This also helps parents and staff alike to think of "teaching" as something that happens during parents' regular interactions with their children, rather than as a separate activity.

Objective 4: To provide attainable goals and useful observations for children with severe or profound handicaps.

Many available assessment and curriculum planning tools include developmental steps that are too large for children with severe developmental delays. Often these children show little or no measurable progress on a formal assessment--an outcome that both parents and staff find discouraging. Thus, there is a need for an assessment tool that breaks goals into very small steps and thereby enables parents and staff to observe progress on a regular basis. By providing numerous items within a small range of development, the calendar system described here aims to enable parents to observe at least one new skill each week with a severely or profoundly handicapped infant. By helping parents become aware of progress even when their children develop very slowly, such a tool can perhaps increase parents' feelings of hope for their severely involved children.

Development of the Calendar System

Background

The calendar has been developed by two psychologists, an occupational therapist, and a special educator for use in a program for developmentally delayed children, ages birth to three years. These authors thought that infant calendars similar to those available for non-handicapped children had the potential to provide objective documentation of progress, to provide an unobtrusive system for parents, and to increase parent-staff communication. By dramatically increasing the number of stickers available on the commercial calendars for normally-developing children, the authors sought to make the calendars more useful for children with developmental delays.

Each author compiled a list of developmental items to place on stickers in one of four developmental areas: cognitive, language, fine motor, and gross motor. The items covered development that normally occurs between birth and six months of age. Goals for the stickers included (a) to develop 50 to 100 items in each

developmental area; (b) to choose behaviors that parents can observe during the regular routines of play, feeding, and other child care; and (c) to break development into small enough steps that parents of a severely delayed child would use at least one sticker each week. Ideas for some of the items came from the references listed at the end of this paper: others were based on experiences with children. At least one other author reviewed each set of items.

Materials Developed and Used

Materials included the following:

(a) A handout describing the system for parents (see Appendix A).

(b) A calendar for each family.

(c) Developmental stickers, each with a number and letter to designate developmental area and skill number, followed by a brief description of a developmental skill. The total of 349 stickers included 113 language items, 109 cognitive items, 70 gross motor items, and 57 fine motor items, all falling at or below the 6-month level of normal development. Items in the language, cognitive, and gross motor sections were grouped by situation or skill. For example, items involving eye contact with a parent with the child on his or her back included items 5 through 10. Fine motor items were ordered so that all items followed a developmental sequence, without regard to situation or skill. For example, item 20 would usually occur before item 21 and item 35 before item 40 even the type of skill observed for each item differs.

(d) Manuals. Since the stickers used condensed descriptions of the developmental skills (less than 25 characters each), each developmental area also had a list of expanded descriptions of the items on the stickers.

(e) Files. Each child that received stickers had a file that contained available stickers, a list of stickers that the parents had taken home, and staff comments.

Procedure Employed to Test the System

The eleven sets of parents and children who have used this assessment system on a trial basis were enrolled in an early intervention program that serves developmentally delayed children between 6 months and 3 years and their parents. The program

emphasizes parent education and involvement. Parents and their children come to the program twice each week for half an hour of individual time and one and a half hours of small group activities. A developmental psychologist, occupational therapist, and language specialist staff the program.

Parents in the program first learned about the calendar assessment concept in October, 1983 during a group meeting. After a discussion of the characteristics of the system they received a handout further explaining the calendar.

All parents in the program received calendars during the week of October 24, 1983. Four children in the group functioned at developmental levels under 6 months; their parents received stickers with developmental items plus the manual of expanded descriptions of the items. Seven children functioned above the 6 month level; their parents received only calendars on which to record written comments.

The group provided with stickers initially received only 10 stickers in each of the four developmental areas, since the staff thought that 349 stickers plus the manual would overwhelm parents. The first set of stickers contained two or three items in each area that the program staff thought the child had already accomplished and seven or eight other items that would follow those in a developmental sequence. A staff member then met with each parent and child once every one to two weeks to discuss the stickers and comments on the calendars. When the staff member observed the child performing a task noted on the calendar, he or she initialed the sticker. The staff person also provided the parent with additional stickers so that each parent had a total of ten stickers in each developmental area after each discussion.

Results

After approximately two weeks, the group of parents without stickers stopped using the calendars. These parents did not bring their calendars to the program for discussion, voiced uncertainty about what to write and the purpose of writing on the calendars, and generally considered writing notes on the calendar a burden. Of the four children with stickers, one parent misplaced the calendar; one parent used the calendar until her child moved on to a program for older children at the end of January; and two parents used the calendars until the staff collected them in February. After using the calendar system, the four parents with stickers also completed a questionnaire about their reactions to the system.

Table 1. Calendar Data

	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4	Total	Mean
Stickers given to parent	91	60	92	128	361	90
Stickers on calendar	50*	17	52	91	210	53
Behaviors confirmed by staff		9	43	38	90	30
Adapted stickers		2	14	1	17	6
Written parent comments		8	40	51	99	33
Attendance	71%	76%	85%	38%		

*Estimated

Use of the Calendars

Table 1 summarizes the data regarding the use of the calendars by parents with stickers. During approximately four months of use, these parents received an average of 90 stickers and placed an average of 53 stickers on the calendar. Of the stickers placed on the calendars, the staff observed an average of 30 of the items. In some cases, staff and parents adapted the items on the stickers to the special needs of a child (e.g., for a child with a visual impairment). Although parents without stickers did not write comments on their calendars, parents with stickers wrote many comments in addition to using the stickers. Apparently, the stickers provided a motivating system for the parents to use and encouraged them to record other information as well.

Questionnaire Responses

The parents who used the calendar system with stickers reported an overwhelmingly positive reaction to the system when they completed a Likert-type questionnaire. All of the parents reported positive or very positive feelings about using the calendar and all of them said the amount of time required was reasonable. They reported that the calendar often or very often helped them (a) notice new skills that their children acquired, (b) remember something to tell a staff member, (c) remember a question to ask a staff member, (d) get ideas about ways to work with their children at home, (e) and take a more active part in planning their children's program goals.

Discussion

Staff and Parent Reactions

Parents and staff both reacted positively to the trial use of this assessment system. In addition to the specific responses reported in the previous section, parents reported informally that they wanted items extend beyond the 6-month developmental level and that they would like a format where they could have all of the stickers at once. The staff members found it very useful to know what behaviors parents had observed in their children at home. This information provided insight into how parents viewed their children's development and required staff and parents to communicate more precisely about what a child was actually doing. The staff members also found that they sometimes did not recognize a child's developmental progress until a parent pointed it out. They also found that the calendars provided a positive atmosphere for discussing development since parents and staff always discussed what a child was doing. The staff did wish for a format that would require somewhat less staff time to administer--perhaps a format in which parents would have all of the stickers at once in an easily-understood framework.

Recommendations for Further Application

Trial use of a calendar-based system of assessment suggests that this approach holds much promise for aiding documentation of child progress in early intervention programs, increasing staff-parent communication, and encouraging parents about their children's progress. Early intervention programs with children who are developing at rates closer to those of typical babies may be able to use commercially available baby calendars with slight modifications. Programs with more severely involved infants can use a system in which a task analysis of each child's objectives are placed on blank stickers (e.g., mailing labels) that could be used with any calendar. Experience with the group of children included in this group suggests that the following considerations would improve the usefulness of the calendars:

(a) Calendars alone without stickers do not motivate parents to keep anecdotal records. Stickers with descriptions of developmental skills provide a crucial motivating factor.

(b) Items should be arranged in small, related groups. Rather than placing six months worth of stickers together, perhaps two

or three month blocks of items or items arranged by objective or teaching situation would prove more useful.

(c) Items should be explained precisely so that parents and staff both have clear perceptions about when a child has performed an indicated skill. Examples of situations in which the parents might observe the skills would also help clarify items.

(d) Items should be adapted for visual and auditory handicaps, or else the format should allow for parents and staff to make these adaptations when using the stickers.

(e) Items in the area of feeding would be useful in addition to those in cognitive, language, gross motor, and fine motor development.

(f) Blank stickers might encourage parents to write down behaviors that they see in their child but that do not appear on stickers already provided.

APPENDIX A
Comments for Parents

This calendar provides a way for you to record your child's developmental progress. We hope that the design of the calendar will help you to notice new things that your child does which you might not otherwise recognize as important. We also hope that the calendar provides a relatively quick and easy way to record the things you see your child do.

Add the stickers for your child's new skills to the square on the dates s/he does them. The stickers list behaviors for you to observe in these areas:

L language--making sounds and communication as well as responding to sounds

C cognitive skills--building an understanding of the world

GM gross motor abilities--using the large muscles of the body

FM fine motor abilities--using the small muscles of the body

Each developmental area has stickers with a letter and a number. These refer to the area (L, C, GM, or FM) and the number of the item in each area. After you have seen your child perform an activity the first time, discuss this with one of the staff members of the infant development program. They will try to obtain the same performance. Frequently, your child will not perform reliably weeks or even months after the first occurrence, so don't be surprised if s/he doesn't perform the activity for another person right away.

Please don't feel confined to using only the stickers. If you see your child do something that isn't on a sticker, jot a short note about it on the day you saw it. Also, write short notes about fun things that happen--such as a birthday party, a visit from Grandma and Grandpa, or a trip to the park--and about new teeth, new foods your child eats, and any other things you want to record. These notes, along with the stickers you put on the calendar, should help when you talk to your child's teacher, pediatrician or anyone else interested in his or her development.

We hope that after using the calendar, you will have a useful and detailed picture of many of the things your child has learned.

We are trying to develop this calendar as a useful way for parents to observe their children. This may provide them with a better basis for communicating with physicians, schools, and

others. We are asking for your help in developing this. Let us know where it is useful and where it gets in the way. How can we improve it so it is more useful or fun for you? What is confusing? Does it take much time? How could it be better organized? Please give us your comments over the next few months.

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